The Scholarly Mystics of Ephrata

John Peter Miller and Conrad Beissel

One cannot visit the town of Ephrata, in Lancaster county, Pa., even in this day of the decline of the old community institution of the Seventh Day Baptists, which has given this German settlement its wide fame, without being profoundly impressed with the greatness of the two men, who have been the chief builders of these colossal monuments of a pious mysticism and this shrine of colonial art and learning. The group of antiquated cloister buildings, which are still well preserved, in spite of the decaying elements of two centuries, tell the story of mental greatness, religious fervor and unflagging industry. The thoughtful visitor is seized with a spirit of veneration as soon as his feet touch this historically and religiously hallowed ground. He thinks with reverent awe of the men who have reared these massive structures, which feeling is only increased as he steps aside to the little consecrated enclosure that holds the sacred dust of these early religious zealots, prominent among which tombs are the graves of the two master builders—Conrad Beissel and John Peter Miller. As the visitor of Halle or Kaiserswerth, in Germany; Bristol or St. Paul's, London, in England; Salt Lake City or Northfield, Mass., in America, is impressed, so the spirit of wonder, of inquiry, of well-nigh worshipful veneration is stirred within the historian, who pays his personal respects to this relic of colonial zeal and devotion still found on the banks of the Cocalico. One instinctively thinks of its founders and builders, as one thinks of Francke and Fliedner, of Mueller and Wren, of Bringham Young and Moody, in the shadow of the institutions which they have reared. As one wanders through the labyrinthian hallways and corridors of this monastery, its narrow cell-like rooms, or its spacious Saals, or else strolls about the grounds of this only Protestant Convent in the United States, the echoes of German song and speech which these halls were accustomed to reverberate for many long decades have changed into the Latin legend of St. Paul's Cathedral marking its builder's tomb, and through the corridors of one's brain sounds the motto, "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice." Not the humble slabs in yonder God's-acre, but rather these many-storied, high-peaked, steep-roofed, low-ceiled, narrow-roomed, small-windowed, log-constructed cluster of ancient cloister-buildings are the monuments of Beissel and Miller.

Although to Beissel belongs the honor of being the real founder and master spirit of this community-settlement, it doubtless reached its highest degree of development through the scholarly influence of John Peter Miller, long the Prior and the successor of Beissel as superintendent of the institution. As a complete biography of Beissel is given in the very interesting volume of Chronicon Ephratense—an excellent translation of which was made by Dr. J. Max Hark, of Bethlehem, published by S. H. Zahm & Co., of Lancaster,—we will refer the reader to this work and the yet fuller treatise of the entire subject of the Ephrata Community in the voluminous work by Julius F. Sachse, and beyond a single paragraph, confine ourself to the sketch of Miller, who proved to be the Melanchthon of his Luther, the Spener of his Francke, the Sankey of his Moody.

John Conrad Beissel was born at Eberbach, on the Neckar, in Germany, in 1690, the posthumous son of a drunken baker. His mother, a godly woman died when he was in his eighth year. He has a sorry life in boyhood, but displayed extraordinary natural gifts, mastering his lessons almost intuitively. He also learned the baker's trade and was a comparatively reckless youth until his conversion in 1715. He fell in with the Baptists of Schwarzenau, whose leader was Alexander Mack, afterwards founder of the German Baptist sect in America. In 1720 Beissel emigrated to America, arriving in Boston that same autumn. He soon came to Germantwon and, after a brief stay, settled in 1721 in the Conestoga country, where on the Mill Creek of Lancaster county he took up a hermit's life. He had several associates of like mind as neighbors. He passed several years in solitude, yet, fanned by the intense sect-spirit that swept over the State at that period, he took up the religious agitation. Breaking away from his Baptist associates on the questions of the Sabbath and marriage, he founded the German Seventh Day Baptist Society or sect. It had a small beginning. Its cause was advocated by tract and agitated by missionary efforts. There were great "awakenings" and the founder's hermit life was abandoned for a community life. The new settlement, in 1732, was founded in the wilderness on the banks of the Cocalico. Ephrata was founded, and after zealous missionary or proselyting efforts the community became established. Such noted characters as Alexander Mack and his brother, Conrad Weiser, Rev. John Peter Miller, the wife of Christopher Saur, (the illustrious printer of Germantown), the Eckerlins, and converts from the surrounding counties, from New Jersey, Maryand and even Germany, were either temporarily or permanently attracted to it. A wealthy Swiss, Benedict Yuehly by name, was attracted to the community and left his wealth for building purposes. Others dedicated their earthly possessions to the same end and thus came to be built the edifice which housed this quaint religious community and colonial university in this heart of the Pennsylvania-German settlement. The checkered, but always busy, sometimes perplexed, sometimes persecuted life of Beissel was thus lived not amid these strange and ever-changeful scenes, so characteristic of the religious fanatic and yet so enterprising in the promotion of useful arts and learning, that the institution has always been the marvel of the outside world. It has attracted to it as curious spectators many immigrants and foreign visitors, religious and political leaders in its earliest stages, and the historian and antiquarian has not yet ceased to wend his footsteps in the direction of these quaint architectural relics on the Cocalico.

Beissel, who was known as Father Friedsam Gottrecht by the brethren of the community, "laid aside his mortal raiment" on July 6, 1768, attended by all the brethren and sisters of the Convent, who gave him their parting kiss, while the Rev. J. Peter Miller, "gave him his blessing with laying on of hands." His published works are hymns, 441; sermons, 66; letters, 73; lectures, many, while many manuscripts were left, from which the man's religious views and hopes can be judged.

Of all Beissel's many adherents, the one man who entered deepest into his sympathies, was truest to his purposes, contributed most to the community's progress and served longest and most conspicuously as its virtual head and overseer, was John Peter Miller. Born, Dec. 25, 1709, in Lautern, in the upper Palatinate, a graduate of Heidelberg, he landed in Philadelphia, Aug. 29, 1730, as a candidate of theology, a pioneer of the German Reformed ministry in this country. Assuming charge of Rev. Geo. M. Weiss' congregations at Goshenhoppen, etc., he was ordained by the Presbyterians of Philadelphia, who were amazed at the young man's learning. In 1731 Miller took charge of several congregations on the frontier, taking up his abode at the Tulpehocken, and he served this charge as Reformed pastor for four years. One of the congregations was located on the Cocalico (Bethany's Reformed Church, near Ephrata), where doubtless he became personally acquainted with Beissel, who had already established himself and inaugurated his work in the same neighborhood. Rev. J. Philip Boehm, who was the founder of this latter congregation of the Reformed, and who had been temporarily supplanted by Weiss and Miller, writes thus suspiciously of Miller in his report to the Synod in Holland, Oct. 18, 1734: "At present there is only one other (Reformed) minister in this province, Peter Miller. When he could not convince the people of his views, he gave up his service altogether and is now an 'Olypresser.' How he tried to mislead the people can clearly be seen from this, not to mention other things, that about two years ago he went with one of his elders, whom he had installed at Goshenhoppen into a house of a Seventh Day Baptist, where he allowed himself to be called brother, and permitted the man to wash his feet and that is the truth."

His conversion to this sect of Dunkers was therefore gradual and followed quite naturally. His renunciation of the Reformed faith and pastorate occurred the following spring when he was baptized by Beissel. Boehm again in his report of 1739 alludes to him as having publicly gone over "to the dissolute Seventh Day Dunkers and was baptized in Dunker fashion at Conestoga in the month of April, 1735. He took ten families, Reformed and Lutheran, from the congregation of Tulpehocken with him, who followed his example. This created a great commotion among the congregations." The CHRONICON EPHRATENSE after recording Pastor Miller's settlement at Tulpehocken gives the following account of his conversion to this sect: "The superintendent (Beissel), after he had heard that two young preachers had come into the country, who stood in good repute as to their character, and also thought well of his work, aware of his own inability, in view of the important work before him, thought in his foolishness that this work would be better carried out if God would provide one of these young preachers for him, for which also, he often bowed his knees before God. This led to important matters. For the superintendent soon after found occasion to make a visit to Tulpehocken with several of his disciples, where he was received by the teacher and elders with the consideration due to him as an ambassador of God, while on his return the teacher, and C. W. (Conrad Weiser), an elder, accompanied him over the mountains for six miles. The result of their visit to Tulpehocken was that the teacher, the elders and several others withdrew from the Church: Whereupon a venerable Pietist, by the name of Casper Leibbecker, took the teacher's place in the Church....Accordingly they were baptized together under the water, after the teaching of Christ, which was done on a Sabbath in May of the year 1735. Thus the teacher, schoolmaster, three elders, besides various other households, went over from the Protestant to this new awakening, while for some time after the door was kept open for the Babylonian refugees..Soon after the Brethren erected a solitary residence for the teacher at the foot of a high hill in Tulpehocken, where, however, he lived no longer than till the next November....The report of this great conversion filled not only this and neighboring countries, but penetrated even into Germany."

Thus Miller came to take up his abode and work with Beissel, at Ephrata. While Conrad Weiser, after a few years of loyal adherence, returned to his first love, drawn back by his domestic ties, the political demands and his own religious convictions, Miller remained faithful to his new espousal during all of his extended lifetime. He was soon selected as one of the four leaders of the community, chosen because of their superior excellence. Miller was named Brother Jabez, and after the removal of Onesimus (Mr. Eckerlin) as Prior of the Convent, in 1745, he permanently succeeded him in this office, having previously been temporary or assistant Prior. Upon the death of Father Friedsam, Brother Jabez was elevated to the office of Superintendent and Pastor of the Community, which office he filled until his death in 1796. These years were filled with the labors and various duties of these offices, together with most arduous literary work, in the translation, editing and printing of the many vloumes that have come from the Ephrata press.

This press, the second German press in the country, was ever kept busy. It became a pioneer in producing the German literature of America. It sent out no less than ten different hymn-books, the hymns, paper, ink and printing being of the Community's own production. The largest volume printed in America during the eighteenth century —the great Mennonite "Martyrs' Mirror" of Van Braght—was produced here. It was a colossal work and yet accomplished so successfully that in its size and superior excellence of workmanship, hardly excelled in our day of artistic printing, it remains a monument to the skill and untiring industry of these colonial monks of Ephrata.

Fifteen men, set aside by prayer, gave most painstaking and unremitting toil for three consecutive years to the production of this work, which appeared in 1748 under the direction of the new scholarly Prior, Peter Miller. It was the "greatest literary effort of Colonial Pennsylvania," says Prof. Brumbaugh. The original Dutch work appeared in Holland in 1562 and ran through many editions, but had become scarce, inaccessible or unreadable, and hence the German Mennonites of Pennsylvania desired its re-appearance in German dress in the critical, martial period, which insured the translation and re-publication of Ephrata. Peter Miller assumed the task of translation, as he was a superior liguistic scholar. He devoted himself to the task with such devotion that for three years he did not sleep more than four hours a night. The type was set by four of Miller's assistants, another four ran the press, and the others made the paper. In three years the great work was done. It contained fifteen hundred and twelve pages; printed upon strong, thick paper, in large type, in order, as was said in the preface, "that it may suit the eyes of all." It was bound in thick boards, covered with leather, with brass mountings on the corners and two heavy brass clasps. It had a number of most artistic plate illustrations. An edition of 1,300 was issued, selling at twenty shillings "not to get rich," as Miller declared, but for the honor of God and the promotion of religion. Strange, the outbreak of the Revolution still found about five hundred of them unsold, which the Continental army in a scarcity of paper confiscated for gun-wads, so that what was intended as an advocate of peace, became a literal shiew of war. It was not yielded up without protest by the Brethren, but when two wagons and six soldiers arrived and prompt payment was offered, reluctant leave was granted. The CHRONICON says that "this gave great offence in the country (by non-combatants, possibly), and many thought that the war would not end favorably, because the memorial of the holy martyrs had been thus maltreated. At last, however, they were honored again for some sensible persons bought in all that were left of them."

Many are the incidents recounted that extol the magnanimity nad scholarship of John Peter Miller. Long before the Revolutionary period he had gained for himself wide fame for his scholarship, for every visitor to the place—and there were many of distinction and ability—became aware of this fact. George Ross, of Lancaster, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, as well as Benjamin Franklin, knew the place and man intimately. And so it came, most likely at their suggestions, that Thomas Jefferson, the author of this immortal document, secured Miller to translate it into seven of the European languages immediately after its adoption by Congress. (The historicity of this is now doubted.-Ed.) Thus it happened that the American cause became early and favorably known to the nations of Europe through Miller's able pen.

In the absence of any portrait of this subject of our sketch we give here the very excellent description by Provost Magister Israel Acrellius, Provots of the Swedish Churches in America and Rector of the Old Swedes Church, Wilmington, Del., who in his "History of New Sweden," includes a graphic account of a visit to the cloister on Sept. 7, 1753, in company with George Ross. After a description of the cloister, the chief features of the religion and life maintained here, come pen sketches of the principal leaders. That of Miller is as follows:

"There was also a brother named Jabez, who, before his rebaptism was called Peter Miller. He had been a German Calvinistic minister, came into the country according to their custom, as a candidate for the ministry of the Reformed Church of the country, was afterwards ordained by the Presbyterian minister, Mr. Andrew, in Philadelphia, and for a long time preached in the various parts of the country among the Germans before that, eighteen years since he betook himself to Ephrata. He is a learned man, understands the Oriental languages, speaks Latin, discusses theological controversies as well as other sciences; although, in his present condition he has forgotten much. He is of a good stature, with a friendly face and friendly manners, on which account strangers always get introduced to him and seek his society. He is open-hearted toward those to whom he takes a liking and is modest and genial. The brethren have great respect for him, and not without reason, for he is a prudent man, upon whom their order chiefly depends, although he gives himself no higher name than that of a simple brother. In their public worship he reads the Scriptures, and also baptizes when so directed by Father Friedsam.

Father Friedsam lives by himself in a little house between the brothers' and sisters' cloisters, being waited upon by the brethren, and has his food from their kitchen. He lives in entire solitude, except when messengers go out or in, or he performs his duties in the congregation.

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"In the cloister there is a printing office, with a press, together with new type, fair and clear, brought from Frankfort. But it has not yet repaid either its expense or its trouble. Some books have been printed there written by the brethren themselves. The 'History of the Persecutions of the Anabaptists' has given them the most trouble and the least return. They have had a proposal to print the Classic Authors for the Philadelphia Academy, but Muller said that he was now tired of that work, was alone in it, and his sight was growing weak.

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"As I had now been among these brethern from Friday noon until Saturday afternoon, it was time to return to Lancaster. The brethern asked me several times when I would come again to see them. This seemed to me as though they thought I had some desire to join their society. I took leave of the brethren and invited them to visit me if their way was so directed. Muller, who, during all this time, had kept me company, followed me down to the mill a short distance from the cloister where they had my horse. He bore my traveling sack the whole way for me, and when I objected to it, he said, 'You may permit me to carry it now, perhaps I can never do it again.'

"Finally, I took a friendly leave of my companion, I thanked him that he did not dislike me for being of a different way of thinking. I hoped that if we did not see each other any more in this life, we might meet with joy in that place where there should be one fold and one Shepherd; where all controversies in theology would cease; where love should abide forever after all other gifts disappear. He took me in his arms and kissed me, thanked me, and said 'That is a good wish. I hope we shall meet in that place, although we travel different roads. I shall pray to God for you. Farewell!"

Finding such superior scholarship and such highly-developed Christian graces in the leading spirits of this institution, we are not surprised to learn that here was established and maintained for a long time a school which attracted many a youth from the larger cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore during our colonial period. Here were taught useful trades and fine arts. The very finest Fracturschrift, or illuminated pen letter-work was here taught. These letters were used as ornamental initials in their books, making their publications famous for their artistic features. Their work also adorned the walls of the institution in finely ornamented texts of wrought pen work.

Likewise was there established here as early as 1739 the earliest Sabbath-school known, so that nearly a half century before Robert Raikes, the printer of Gloucester, England, gathered the waifs of his town into a similar school—commonly regarded as the birthday of modern Sunday schools, Peter Miller was superintending such a school on the banks of the Cocalico.

Here was established a hospital for the sick and wounded American soldiers after the battle of Brandywine, September, 1777, and from known accounts, Gen. Washington probably visited the place, as he is known to have been at the Reading Furnace, located a little to the southeast, just a week after the battle. The old buildings of Kedar and Zion, located on Mt. Zion, the higher grounds of the place, were occupied by over four hundred of the wounded of the battle fought September 11th, Peter Miller's Capuchins and White Friars nursed them, while he ministered to their spiritual needs. Doctors Yerkel, Scott and Harrison had surgical and medical charge of the hospital, but owing to a terrible epidemic of camp fever, almost half of them died and were buried here.

Thus did Miller spend his American life. More than sixty years of his long and useful career were given to the establishment and furtherance of mystical piety, personal religion, and literary advancement in this quaint monastic institution by the Cocalico. Here he died in peace at a great age and was gathered to his fathers. His tomb is found in the little "God's acre" next to that of Conrad Beissel's.

From the Pennsylvania German Magazine, April, 1906.—(Epitaphs of John Peter Miller and Conrad Beissel will appear in the next number of the ECK.—Ed.)

The Ephrata Cloisters

In the valley that's washed by Cocalico's waters,
Where a forest primeval once covered the land,
The village of Ephrata lay in seclusion,
The home of an exiled, God-fearing band.

Dunkers were they who had settled that valley,
Led by the fugitive Beissel, the baker.
Stern was he in exacting obedience,
Meekness, devotion and faith in their Maker.

They felled the trees of the virgin forest;
They cleared the land for their crops of corn.
They built them homes in their own rude fashion,
To shelter them from the rain and storm.

The soil was rich in that woodland valley,
In that beautiful vale on Cocalico's strand,
With nature in harmony, solitude offered
A balm for the woes of that sorely tried band.

Somewhat apart from the village are standing
Those cloisters still, as in days of yore,
Filling a place in the hearts of the people,
The center and subject of mystical lore.

Close by the side of those quaint old cloisters,
In a graveyard kept plainly and well,
Rest in peace the bones of their builders,
Each inmate once of an anchorite's cell.

Here lies the body of Miller, the printer,
His sepulchre decked with a rough slab of stone,
Bearing a simple inscription in German
Telling the wayfarer what he has done.

Side by side with Miller there lieth
In the midest of that churchyard old
Beissel, the spot where his ashes are resting
Marked with a headstone covered with mold.

Here of their faith those steadfast defenders
Sleep in the bosom of earth, their bed.
Vengeance on him who presumes to disturb this
Sacred and honored abode of the dead!

—PAUL J. BICKEL